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THE REAL LIFE

OF

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

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A. Lincoln

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THE REAL LIFE

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

A TALK WITH MR. HERNDON,

HIS LATE LAW PARTNER.

BY

GEORGE ALFRED TOWNSEND.

WITH CABINET PORTRAIT, AND MR. LINCOLN'S FAVORITE POEM.

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

A TALK WITH THE LATE PRESIDENT'S LAW PARTNER.

The following charming description of the real life of the late President was written by the accomplished poet, lecturer, and correspondent, Mr. GEORGE ALFRED TOWNSEND, and published in the *New York Tribune*. It is dated—

SPRINGFIELD, ILL., Jan. 25, 1867.

When history makes up its mind to commemorate a place, no special correspondence can keep pace with it. After Mr. Lincoln's nomination to the Presidency—the most Republican of all *coups d'etat*—the little city of Springfield ascended at a bound from the commonplace to the memorable. Caravans of patriots from all the other States wended across the prairies to visit it. From a market town, where eggs were duly exchanged for calico, and the father of the family reported himself twice a year to get stone-drunk, it rose to be the home of a President, and sent him across the continent to usefulness and martyrdom. His body lies near by it—shrine which any city might covet—and his prim frame residence, practical and mud-colored, I have walked around these two nights, to find my curiosity shared by a half-dozen couples, looking upon it as if the tall ghost of its former owner might possibly appear.

I came here to lecture; of two days leisure spared me I have passed one-half of each in conversation with a man who knew the great citizen of Springfield for twenty years anterior to his Chief Magistracy better and closer than any human being. Until very lately you might have read upon a bare stairway, opposite the State House Square, the sign of LINCOLN & HERNDON. A year ago it gave place to the name of HERNDON & ZANE. Ascending the stairs one flight, you see two doors opening to your right hand. That in the rear leads to what was for one generation the law office of the President. Within, it is a dismantled room, strewn with faded briefs and leaves

of law books; no desks nor chairs remaining; its single bracket of gas darkened in the center, by whose flame he whom our children's children shall reverently name, prepared, perhaps, his gentle, sturdy utterances; and out of its window you get a sweep of stable-roofs and dingy back yards, where he must have looked a thousand times, pondering Freedom and Empire, with his eye upon ash-heaps and crowing cocks and young Americans sledging or ball-playing. As simple an office, even for a country lawyer, as ever I saw in my life, it is now in the transition condition of being prepared for another tenant. In the middle of the room the future President sat at a table side, and in the adjoining front room this table and all the furniture of the place is still retained, while in its back corner, looking meditatively at the cylinder stove, you see Mr. Herndon, the partner and authority I have referred to.

He has given me permission to write what I choose of himself and his dead friend, and among all the men I have ever met he is the readiest to understand a question and to give even and direct answers. He resembles Mr. Lincoln so much, and in his present quarters, garb, and worldly condition, is so nearly a reproduction of A. Lincoln, lawyer, as he lived before Fame drove a chariot through this second story, that we may as well take a turn around the surviving man and the room.

Lincoln was the taller and older, and the senior partner; he had been in two or three associations with lawyers; one of his early partners, by fraud or mismanagement, got him into debt, and he carried the burden of it about ten years; his latest partner, excepting Herndon, was anxious to be a candidate for the Legislature, and as Mr. Lincoln desired the same honor at the same time, a dissolution was inevitable, and then to Herndon's great surprise, for he was very young and obscure, Lincoln said: "Billy, let us go into business together." Herndon accepted the proposition thankfully. Mr. Lincoln arranged the terms of partnership, and the new "shingle" went up directly, never to be removed till the bullet of Booth had done its errand.

How young Herndon might have looked twenty-five years ago we can scarcely infer from the saffron-faced, blue-black haired man before us, bearded bushily at the throat, disposed to shut one eye for accuracy in conversation, his teeth discolored by tobacco, and over his angular features, which suggest Mr. Lincoln's in ampleness and shape, the same half-tender melancholy, the result in both cases, perhaps, of hard frontier work, poor pay, thoughtful abstraction, and a disposition to share the sorrows of mankind.

Oh! why should the spirit of mortal be proud—

is the sentiment of Herndon's face, as it was of Mr. Lincoln's—a gravity that befits greatness well, when it comes, and in the dress of the firm of Lincoln & Herndon you see this sentiment practicalized. "Mr. Lincoln," said Mr. Herndon, "cared so little about clothes that sometimes he did not put all of them on. He was brought up barefoot." Mr. Herndon, by parallel, wears to-day a bright yellow pair of breeches, turned up twice at the bottoms, and looks to be a wind-hardened farmer, rather than one of the best lawyers in the State, and, as a public man, is charged with delivering the best stump speeches in Illinois, on the Republican side, during the last election. His address is homely in form, commencing with, "Friend, I'll answer you;" and this he does without equivocation, with his long fore-finger extended, and with such fund of new information upon the revered memory in question that although the Lincoln biographers, from Holland up, have talked with him, he seems to be brimful of new reminiscences. With an extraordinary memory, great facility of inference, and a sturdy originality of opinion, he had the effect upon me to stagger all my notions of the dead President's character. He has been a wonderful desultory reader, and in his law library you may see the anomalous companions for a prairie attorney of Bailey's *Festus*, Schlegel's Critique, Comte's Philosophy, Louis Blanc, and many of the disobedient essayists. He has one of the best private libraries in the West, and in this respect is unlike Mr. Lincoln, who seldom bought a new book, and seldom read one. Mr. Lincoln's education was almost entirely a newspaper one. He was one of the most thorough newspaper readers in America, and for fifteen years before his election to the Presidency subscribed regularly to *The Richmond Enquirer* and *The Charleston Mercury*. He grew slowly, therefore, as public opinion grew, and as an Anti-Slavery man was a gradual convert; whereas Herndon, years before, embraced at a leap all the social reforms, read all the agitators, and talked human liberty to Mr. Lincoln, gravely listening, till a fraternity of sentiment developed, and about the year 1844 the coming emancipator declared himself an enemy of slaveholding.

It is worth while to stop and ponder that while Rhett and Wise, with Slavery in full feather, wrote every day of the inviolateness of Secession and the divinity of bondage, these two Illinois lawyers, in their little square office, read every vaunting, cruel word, paid to read it, and educated themselves out of their mutual indignations—the one to a grand agency, the other to as grand an abhorrence.

Mr. Lincoln had some six or seven places of residence during his life; he was of full age before he left his family never to return, and

the pleasantest of his reminiscences were of his mother, to whom he imputed the best and the brightest qualities he had inherited. He broke out once to Mr. Herndon, as they were returning from Court in another county :

"Billy, all I am or can be I owe to my angel-mother."

As a boy Lincoln made a frontiersman's living by hard work, poling a flat-boat, getting out cedar and chestnut rails, even sawing wood. The scene of his early struggles was Indiana, and there he developed into a sort of amateur public clerk, writing letters for folks to whom a steel pen was a mystery, giving miscellaneous advice on law and business, and excelling particularly in the ingenuities of anecdote and illustration. The story-telling reputation he retains was no fabulous qualification, nor was it an idle and gossipy recreation, but a means of making intelligence plain to rude minds. At this stage of his life he wore moccasins and a hunting-shirt, and was in great request by thick-headed people, because of his skill and clearness in narration. The jury always got from him a fair statement of any case in hand, and years later it was remarked by the Chief Justice of Illinois that when Lincoln spoke he argued both sides of the case so well that a speech in response was always superfluous. The habit he had of enforcing a fact with an anecdote so far survived his moccasin days that it seems to have been constitutional in a sense. No man ever told so many stories, and he was seldom known either to repeat one twice or to tell one that was hackneyed. His long, variable and extensive experience with common, native people made him acquainted with a thousand oddities, and he had a familiar way of relating them that was as piquant as his application of them. It is also true that some of these stories were more cogent than delicate, yet in no single case was he ever remembered to have told an exceptional anecdote for the sake of that in which it was exceptional. Mr. Herndon remembers a person who so far mistook Mr. Lincoln once as to tell a coarse story without a purpose. During the recital Mr. Lincoln's face worked impatiently. When the man had gone he said :

"I had nearly put that fellow out of the office. He disgusts me."

Finally settled at Springfield, Mr. Lincoln found the law jealous and niggard. He was always able to keep a horse, and was very fond of riding ; but he made a poor income, though one not incommensurate with the general smallness of his colleagues at the Illinois bar. Now and then he was pinched to distress, and went to bed with no notion of how he should meet the morrow's claims. For nearly a fifth part of his whole life he owed money that he could not pay, and although of easy disposition, the debt galled him and hastened

his wrinkles. He cleared himself finally on his return from Washington City, where he sat as a Representative in Congress. When he quitted Springfield for the White House he was worth just \$30,000. Never moody nor petulant, he yet loved solitude and self-communion, and has been known to sit six hours in one place, to lie on his back, for example, on the floor of his house, looking absently at the ceiling, or to sun himself, sitting upon a fence, or in a hay-mow all the day, passing the processes of a plea through his mind, or forming some political judgment.

The tenderness of his nature was not always manifest, yet he had his romance in early manhood, and as of this Mr. Herndon had spoken in public, I asked particularly about it.

At Sangamon, Illinois, a pretty and high-spirited girl, without fortune, made havoc in many hearts, and Mr. Lincoln constituted one of three earnest suitors who wanted her in marriage. She preferred the addresses of a young merchant of the town, and gave the other two their *congé*. Her affianced soon afterwards went East to buy goods, but as he returned was taken with brain fever in some wayside town, and lay raving for three months, unknown by name or residence to his entertainers. A rumor started that he had run away to avoid marrying his lady, and, waiting some time in vain to hear from him, she received anew the attentions of Mr. Lincoln. About the time when they passed from courtesy to tenderness, and marriage between them was more than hinted at, the sick man returned like a ghost, gauged the condition of affairs, and upbraided the lady with fickleness. She had a delicate sense of honor, and felt keenly the shame of having seemed to trifle with two gentlemen at once; this preyed upon her mind till her body, not very strong, suffered by sympathy, and Mr. Herndon has oral and written testimony that the girl died out of regret at the equivocal position she had unwittingly assumed. The names of all the parties he has given me, but I do not care to print them.

On the dead woman's grave Mr. Lincoln promised himself never to marry. This vow he kept very long. His marriage was in every respect advantageous to him. It whetted his ambition, did not nurse too much a penchant for home indolence that he had, and taught him particularly that there was something called society, which observed one's boots as well as his principles. He was always a loyal and reverent husband, a gentle but not positive father, and his wife saw the Presidency for him before the thought of it troubled him.

He built the frame house in Springfield, which is now so celebrated, at a comparatively recent period. I went over it yesterday

with amusement at its utter practicality. It stands upon a prosaic corner, in an inferior quarter of the town, and was the design of a carpenter, not an architect. A narrow yard and palings shut it from the street; the door is in the middle, and is approached by four or five wooden steps; on the abutment beside these he stood after his nomination, in the blaze of pine torches, the thunder of huzzas breaking around his head, the only solemn man in Springfield. He might have felt that all these gratulations were such as the Aztecs spent upon the beautiful captive who was to be sacrificed in the *teocallis*.

As a lawyer, he was a close student of those cases that interested him. Slow to take them into his mind, passing in their consideration from stage to stage, and if he found beneath an embodied principle, his heart grew into the work of developing it. He frequently sat up all night, preparing some favorite argument, and never failed to present it so perspicuously that dull intellects grew appreciative and shrewd ones absorbed. Some of his legal arguments are described as having been classical. Yet, beneath all the drudgery of his craft, he was at soul a politician rather than an attorney. Every legal study carried him beyond itself to the mysteries of public infirmity. "He sat," says Mr. Herndon, "looking through a brief to the construction of society and the moral government of God." Now and then he shut himself up all night, and lay on his office floor in his careless garments, revolving some problem set by a village client that had expanded to a great human principle. At these times he seemed to be a dreamer reasoning. Again, he drove miles over the prairies with his lips close shut, wrinkling, softly humming, and returned again at night strangely white and exhausted.

Before his great public call came he had passed the world through his silent thought, as if it had been a legal case to be stated and argued.

"Did he ever quarrel, Mr. Herndon?"

"Seldom, friend, but sometimes. Once I saw him incensed at a Judge for giving an unfair decision. It was a terrible spectacle. As he was grand in his good nature, so he was grand in his rage. At another time I saw two men come to blows in his presence; he picked them up separately and tossed them apart like a couple of kittens. He was the strongest man I ever knew, and has been known to lift a man of his own weight and throw him over a worm fence. Once, in Springfield, the Irish voters meditated taking possession of the polls. News came down the street that they would permit nobody to vote but those of their own party. Mr. Lincoln seized an ax-handle from a hardware store, and went alone to open a way to the ballot-box.

His appearance intimidated them, and we had neither threats nor collisions all that day. He was never sick during the whole of our long acquaintance; being a man of slow circulation, and of most regular habits, capable of subsisting upon a morsel, he was wiry and indurated beyond the best of our Western men, and even with Booth's bullet in his brain he lived ten hours. His life in general was smooth and unruffled. He had no prejudices against any class, preferring the Germans to any of the foreign element, yet tolerating—as I (Herndon) never could—even the Irish."

"Did he ever drink?"

"Only in Indiana, when he took whisky as ague medicine. After his nomination for the Presidency it was suggested to him that the Visiting Committee would require some hospitality. 'Very well,' he said, 'any food that is proper I authorize to be purchased.'"

"'But these gentlemen will expect some liquors.'"

"'I can't permit to strangers what I do not do myself. No liquors, Billy! there's the tavern!'"

Of miscellaneous books Mr. Lincoln's favorites were Shakspeare and Pope. He never read Byron, and of contemporary American poets preferred the patriotic selections chiefly. Milton he knew by heart, and was a good literary reader of the Bible. His friends were selected with regard to their sincerity chiefly; he loved not cliques, and those who knew him best were younger than he. He was cautious in friendships, no hero-worshiper, and for Mr. Douglas, his most prominent antagonist, had much less admiration than repulsion. Douglas was uneasily arrogant in Lincoln's presence; the latter, never sensitive nor flurried, so grew by his imperturbability that when he reached the White House, Mr. Douglas was less surprised than anybody else. The great Senatorial campaign, in which they figured together, is remembered by every Springfielder. Douglas, with his powerful voice and facile energy, went into it under full steam. Lincoln began lucidly and cautiously. When they came out of it Douglas was worn down with rage and hoarseness, and Lincoln was fresher than ever. He prepared all the speeches of this campaign by silent meditation, sitting or lying alone, studying the flies on the ceiling. The best evidence of his superiority in this debate is the fact that the Republicans circulated both sets of speeches as a campaign document in 1860, and Mr. Douglas' friends refused to do so.

The most remarkable episode of Herndon's conversation—which I am repeating by memory only—relates to Mr. Lincoln's Presidential aspirations. In common with most people, I had concluded that this great honor came to Mr. Lincoln without paving, as unexpected

as it was unsolicited, and to him a staggering piece of luck, like a lottery prize. This estimate is a charming one, but it is not a true one. When the Douglas and Lincoln contest was ended, the defeated man said to his partner:

"Billy, I knew I should miss the place when I competed for it. This defeat will make me President."

He refused, in the interim, any proposition looking to his acceptance of a lesser office, and this with the concurrence of his friends and family. At the same time he took no immediate means to precipitate his opportunity, rather, like a man destined, sat more closely to study and vigilance, read all the issues as they developed, and waited for his call.

It came at last, in a special invitation to visit New York and speak in the Cooper Institute. He felt intuitively that this was the Rubicon, and, with a human thrill, paused and hesitated.

It is possible that, at this moment, had any close friend whispered "stay," the Republic might be dead and Abraham Lincoln living.

"Go, Mr. Lincoln," said Herndon, "make your best effort. Speak with your usual lucidity and thoroughness."

Home said "Go" also.

He appeared in New York, as all of you remember, and his success there drew the attention of the country to his name. The West can originate men: the East must pass them; and the firm of Lincoln & Herndon died, in reality, when the Convention met at Chicago. He had by this time reached the highest usefulness in his State of which his nature was capable.

The best lawyer in it, the hero of a debate equivalent to a Senatorship, with a mind too broad and grave for a mere gubernatorial place, and already by four years' destiny and preparation President of the United States, he went up to the post with a dignity and case that made men stare, because they had not seen the steps he took upon the road.

At last he came to his office for the last time.

"Billy," said he, "we must say good-bye."

Both of them cried, speechlessly.

"You shall keep up the firm-name, Billy, if it will be of use to you."

They shook hands upon it, with tears in their eyes.

"I love the people here, Billy, and owe them all that I am. If God spares my life to the end, I shall come back among you, and spend the remnant of my days."

He never returned to Springfield till glory brought him home

under her plumes, a completed life, and the prairie, like a neighbor, opened its door to take him in.

When Mr. Herndon saw him again at Washington City he was furrowed and fretted with state cares. They talked a while of the old office, the clients, and the town, and then the war rolled between them once more.

One sentence Mr. Herndon recollects of the President before his departure for Washington that is memorable as showing his purpose.

"Billy," he said, "I hope there will be no trouble; but I will make the South a grave-yard rather than see a Slavery gospel triumph, or successful secession lose this Government to the cause of the people and representative institutions."

To this Mr. Herndon added: "Mr. Lincoln was merciless in the abstract. Battles never moved him, unless he trode among their corpses. He would have carried on the war forever, or as long as the people intrusted him its management, rather than give up."

Speaking thus, among the associations of his working life, the years of Abraham Lincoln began to return in the vividness of their monotony, bleak and unremunerated, hard and practical, full of patient walk down a road without a turning, brightened by dutifulness alone, pointed but not cheered by wayside anecdote, and successful, not so much because he was sanguine of himself, as because he rated not eminence and honor too high or too difficult. When he found himself competing for the Senatorship with the quickest, the least scrupulous, and the most flattered orator in the Union, he saw nothing odd nor dramatic about it. His Presidential opportunity surprised everybody but himself—not that he had self-conceit, but that he thought the office possible. He was none of your Richelieus, meditating aside the great uses to which Providence had put him. He never made a bid for the favor or forgiveness of history, but ruled the nation as if it were practicing law, and practiced law as if it were ruling the nation. This real greatness of mind, this obliviousness of circumstances, ascending from a practice of three thousand dollars a year to twenty-five thousand, as if there was no contrast between them, giving "Billy" permission to use the firm style as before, without a conscious poetic trait, yet ever in absent moments looking very long away pondering the distance of rewards, promises, vindications, with a longing that was poetry—these compose some of the character of one whose fame differs vastly from his life, and must do so by the anomaly of the man. The strongest of his loves and faiths was The People. He had more reverence for them in bulk than for their highest public exemplars. Religiously he was a reverent man without creed, believing in a beneficent God—no more. No denomination

has a special claim to him; he was not a regular church-goer; the few clergymen whom he liked recommended themselves on personal grounds; he refused to argue on religious matters, but inclined toward Congregational independence. His mother and sisters were fond of camp-meetings, and a rather humorous letter held by Mr. Herndon says that a portion of their family was regularly converted every year, and backslid in the Winter.

I know of no better illustration of the difference between the real life and the renown of Mr. Lincoln than you get by visiting his grave. A horse railroad, two miles long, leads to it, in the cemetery of Oak Ridge. Behind you is his real life, Springfield, a Western market town, set upon the monotonous prairie, half the year noisy with the chatter of politicians, plethoric with lawyers, for all of whom there is less than enough to do, and savoring much of the frost and the frontier; a pretty prairie city, but capitalized so that what the State had not done for the town, and what the people expected it to do, make an unfinished desultoriness. All at once, as you approach the Sangamon River, the scene changes. Stalwart young oaks of natural growth become plentiful. The landscape is plowed with leafy ravines. Bold knolls start up. A creek goes plashing around the abrupt hills. Shadow, murmur, and surprises succeed the level life of the city. And among all those mysteries, itself the great mystery of our age, the vault of the President caps a hill, a temporary edifice of brick, and the great drive of one of the handsomest cemeteries in the Union winds with the winding brook beneath it:

"The last,
As 'twere the cape of a long ridge of hill,"

and all the white tombs marshal about it; buttonwood, maple and ash trees cluster at its base: here is to be his monument. About \$75,000 have been collected for it up to this time, and it is supposed the State will vote enough to make \$200,000 in all. There is no sweeter spot for a tired life to rest in. It would be blasphemy to mar the dead man's grave with any mere prettiness of marble or smartness of bronze. Let the fiery, untamed Western genius be of timid chisel here. "Abraham Lincoln" is a good epitaph if plainly lettered. And, after all, will any monument be like the man, for no such one was ever a sculptor's theme before. Canova could get no notion of Mr. Lincoln. An allegory would be unlike him, a shaft too formal, a statue too inexpressive. If the Pacific Railroad could be called by his name, that would be better than either; but this man will trouble any artist in that he was so unlike any model.

MR. LINCOLN'S FAVORITE POEM.

As is well known to many persons, the exquisitely beautiful poem entitled "Mortality," referred to in the preceding sketch, was an especial favorite with our late President, but it is not so generally understood that the poem was written by a young Scotchman, who died at thirty-seven—that age so fatal to Burns, Byron, Motherwell, and so many other children of song. One evening in December, 1863, Mr. Lincoln repeated this poem to Col. J. G. Wilson, then in Washington, when the latter said, "Mr. President, you have omitted a portion of it." "What! is there more of it?" responded Mr. Lincoln, with as much eagerness as did the ragged backwoodsman in the story of the Arkansas Traveler. "Yes, sir, two other stanzas;" and he thereupon repeated them to the great delight of the President. "Can you tell me who wrote it?" asked Mr. Lincoln, "for I can't find out. Some of the papers attribute it to me." "It was written," replied the Colonel, "by William Knox, a Scottish poet of considerable talent, who died at Edinburgh in 1825. He published several volumes of poems, and was well known to Sir Walter Scott, 'Christopher North,' of glorious memory, and to many other of the literary magnates of that day." As the poem has already appeared incomplete in various journals, we append it in full:

MORTALITY.

Oh! why should the spirit of mortal be proud?
Like a swift, fleeting meteor, a fast-flying cloud,
A flash of the lightning, a break of the wave,
He passeth from life to his rest in the grave.

The leaves of the oak and the willow shall fade,
Be scattered around and together be laid;
And the young and the old, and the low and the high,
Shall molder to dust and together shall lie.

The infant and mother attended and loved;
The mother that infant's affection who proved;
The husband that mother and infant who blessed—
Each, all, are away to their dwellings of rest.

The maid on whose cheek, on whose brow, in whose eye,
Shone beauty and pleasure—her triumphs are by;
And the memory of those that beloved her and praised,
Are alike from the minds of the living erased.

The hand of the king that the scepter hath borne;
The brow of the priest that the miter hath worn;
The eye of the sage and the heart of the brave,
Are hidden and lost in the depths of the grave.

The peasant, whose lot was to sow and to reap;
The herdsman, who climbed with his goats up the steep;
The beggar, who wandered in search of his bread,
Have faded away like the grass that we tread.

The saint that enjoyed the communion of heaven;
The sinner that dared to remain unforgiven;
The wise and the foolish, the guilty and just,
Have quietly mingled their bones in the dust.

So the multitude goes, like the flower or the weed.
That withers away to let others succeed;
So the multitude comes, even those we behold,
To repeat every tale that has often been told.

For we are the same our fathers have been;
We see the same sights our fathers have seen;
We drink the same stream and view the same sun,
And run the same course our fathers have run.

The thoughts we are thinking our fathers would think;
From the death we are shrinking our fathers would shrink;
To the life we are clinging they also would cling:
But it speeds for us all, like a bird on the wing.

They loved, but the story we cannot unfold;
They scorned, but the heart of the haughty is cold;
They grieved, but no wail from that slumber will come;
They joyed, but the tongue of their gladness is dumb.

They died, ay! they died: we things that are now,
That walk on the turf that lies over their brow,
And make in their dwellings a transient abode,
Meet the things that they met on their pilgrimage road.

Yes ! hope and despondency, pleasure and pain,
We mingle together in sunshine and rain ;
And the smile and the tear, the song and the dirge,
Still follow each other, like surge upon surge.

'Tis the wink of an eye, 'tis the draught of a breath,
From the blossom of health to the paleness of death,
From the gilded saloon to the bier and the shroud.
Oh ! why should the spirit of mortal be proud ?